

TRAP DOOR : VITALITY BREAKS¹ IN THE NOW TIMES

ELAINE M. CARBERRY

Writing necessarily refers to writing. The image is that of a mirror capturing only the reflections of other mirrors. When i say "I see myself seeing myself," I/i am not alluding to the illusory relation of subject to subject (or object) but to the play of mirrors that defers to infinity the real subject and subverts the notion of an original "I." A writing for the people, by the people, and from the people is, literally, a multipolar reflecting reflection that remains free from the conditions of subjectivity and objectivity and yet reveals them both. I write to show myself showing people who show me my own showing. I-You: not one, not two. In this unwonted spectacle made of reality and fiction, where redoubled images form and reform, neither I nor you come first. No primary core of irradiation can be caught hold of, no hierarchical first, second, or third exists except as mere illusion. All is empty when one is plural. Yet how difficult it is to keep our mirrors clean.

Trinh T. Minh-ha, Woman Native Other

Can this being together in homelessness, this interplay of the refusal of what has been refused, this undercommon appositionality, be a place from which emerges neither self-consciousness nor knowledge of the other but an improvisation that proceeds from somewhere on the other side of an unasked question?

[...] That spiraling Mackey speaks of suffers brokenness and crumpling, the imposition of irrationally rationalized angles, compartments bearing nothing but breath and battery in hunted, haunted, ungendered intimacy. Is there a kind of propulsion, through compulsion, against the mastery of one's own speed, that ruptures both recursion and advance? What is the sound of this patterning? What does such apposition look like? What remains of eccentricity after the relay between loss and restoration has its say or song?

Stefano Harney & Fred Moten, The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study

1. INTRODUCTION : COMEDY AS CRITICAL DISSONANCE

Comedy is a liberatory praxis, with a singular capacity to vitalize.

Racism is a temporal construct.

That racist temporality can be carved into relief as a timeline, as a narrative of progress, and also as a narrative of representation.

Linear time and linear narrative are both fueled and shaped by a narrative of progress and a logic of representation, which is/are the same narrative and the same timeline that founds and funds racism. At their core, they share a logic that is fundamentally designed to oppress.

Comedy lays bare the constructed nature of the narrative of progress and the logic of representation – as well as the shoddiness of their construction.

¹ "As thought breaks into speech – as the wave breaks into foam – vitality breaks into humor."
Susanne Langer, *The Comic Rhythm*, 1953

Over the course of this essay, I will illuminate the political thrust of comedy, celebrating the vitality that comedy summons and sources in the context of our landscape, a terrain which threatens extinction. I will first depict our environment, parsing out the narrative of representation that so pervasively shapes and constructs our perceptions of reality. Once we understand that narrative and its (bankrupt) construction, I will go on to describe the ways in which comedy disavows the white supremacist logic and the temporality that emerges from and yet also fuels it.

First establishing our context by articulating the narrative of progress, I will then show how comedy shores up the falseness of linear time and extends a subversive temporality we can all live and breathe in, one that responds truthfully to an honestly perceived surround. Next, I will show how comedy collapses false dichotomies, most significantly the construction of a mind/body polarity at the locus of a racist logic that absolutely requires the dichotomization of the material and the abstract. Finally, I will trace the ways in which comedy insists on specificity, alongside the ways in which the logic of representation demands the false manufacturing of a totalizing world view, as told through the eye of an omniscient narrator.

That is to say:

Comedy extends to us a nonlinear temporality, thereby suffocating the logic of representation that can only run on the constructed, linear, false temporality that furnishes and is furnished by the narrative of progress.

Comedy collapses false dichotomies, which are inextricably woven with and perpetuating a narrative of representation.

Comedy insists on specificity, thereby denouncing a narrative of representation that hinges on the fantasy of a totalizing theorization, a singular truth, an omniscient narrator.

Comic moments, therefore, disavow the narrative of representation. Because the narrative demands its own totalizing truth in order to be held as true – that is, because that narrative insists on a standard that it ontologically cannot meet, comedy proffering even sporadic glimpses of the leaking, tautological foundation underpinning the narrative of progress serves to render the premise entirely moot.

Which is to say:

Comedy operates in nonlinear time.

Comedy collapses false dichotomies.

Comedy insists on specificity.

Therefore: Comedy offers critical vitality in the face of oppression.

The temporality of racism is the narrative of progress. The logic of representation fuels our conception of Time and Story. Such are the stakes of divesting from normative modes of time and story; such are the stakes of locating and grounding into deviant and deviating modes of time, story, and sense-making. When studying the narrative of representation, the pervasive maleficence of its il/logic, the terrain can seem quite bleak. We might get thirsty, begin to wonder: is there time outside this? Is there story beyond this? Are all the blankets infested? Comedy lets us know and comedy drives us to faith:

there is time and there is story and there is truth.

Insisting on subjective, perspectival specificity and collapsing false dichotomies, comedy extends to us nonlinear time and nonlinear story : a rhythmic possibility, a truthful and lively terrain, beyond the narrative of representation – beyond the beyond it.

Often I sit over my papers and I try to find out from what angle a given conflict has to be judged. Usually, I look into the light, at the brightest spot I can find, as I try to enlighten my inner being. [...] And look what happens: as soon as I talk to my sister -- who is sitting and working behind me -- about this matter, I realize what hours of hard thinking have not been able to make clear to me. It isn't as if she was telling me in any direct sense. [...] But since I have some vague thoughts that are in some way connected with what I am looking for, then once I have embarked on the formulation of the thought it is as if the need to lead what has been begun to some conclusion transforms my hazy imaginations into complete clarity in such a way that my insight is completed together with my rambling sentence. I mix in inarticulate noises, I draw out my sentence connectives, I use appositions where they are not strictly necessary and I use other rhetorical tricks that will draw out speech: in this way I gain the time to fabricate my idea in this workshop of reason. [...] The sequences of thoughts and expressions go alongside each other, and the underlying psychological realities converge. Language, under these conditions is not manacles, it is not like some impediment on the wheel of the spirit. Language is a second wheel on the same axle! [...] If therefore a thought is expressed in a fuzzy way, then it does not at all follow that this thought was conceived in a confused way. On the contrary it is quite possible that the ideas that are expressed in the most confusing fashion are the ones that were thought out most clearly. [...] the abrupt change in activity, the passage of the mind from thinking to articulation, this abrupt change dampened that very excitement which was necessary for keeping the thought in mind as well as for putting it into words. [...] For it is not we who know. It is a certain state of us that knows.

Heinrich von Kleist, On The Gradual Formation of Thoughts in the Process of Speech, 1805

2. BUILDING CONTEXTUAL AWARENESS : THE LOGIC OF REPRESENTATION

In his 1991 essay *Race Under Representation*, David Lloyd elucidates the temporal infrastructure of racism – both its logic and composition as a system as well as its mode of reproduction and deployment. Noting that “in the main, the experience and the analysis of racism or race relations have been and continue to be cast in *spatial* terms”² – which he asserts is wholly valid, affirming that we cannot talk about racism without discussing its spatiality – Lloyd argues “that these spatial terms need to be supplemented by an analysis of the temporal axis that is equally constitutive of racist discourse”.³

Articulating that temporal axis, Lloyd cites “a normative temporality of human development that is applied at once to the individual, to individual nations or cultures, and to the human race in general,” and articulates its insidious presence: “the discourse on culture that emerges in the “modern era” of the West is itself structured at every level by this normative developmental schema”.⁴

² Lloyd 249.

³ Lloyd 249.

⁴ Lloyd 250.

Lloyd insists that an analysis of racism cast only in spatial terms is critically myopic, and that if we are to fully understand racism's mechanics and the pervasive grip it extends throughout our ways of seeing and being, we must analyze the temporal construction of racism in tandem with its spatial composition. "The racism of culture is," Lloyd writes, "an ineradicable effect of its fundamental structures".⁵ The more intimate and intricate our understanding of this intimate, intricate system, the more muscle we have with which to dismantle it.

Lloyd calls for the expansion of our understanding of racism to include its temporality – its normative developmental schema – a narrative of representation which undergirds racism at every point of its (incessant) conception and dissemination. Invoking the pervasive utility of this normative developmental schema, Lloyd distills the integral function of a narrative of progress in defining taste and aesthetics, in delineating citizenship and nation, in disseminating colonialism and in (the ever Ginger to its Fred:) justifying colonization. This narrative of representation comprises the scaffolding onto and into which we build our way of making sense, critically funding conceptions of taste, citizenship, nation, the (metro)polis, common sense, as well as subjectivity – both internally, as an individual's selfhood; and externally, as an individual's ability to identify within a larger grouping. As Lloyd exposes, this narrative of representation critically funds and yet is critically funded by hegemonic modes of sense-making.

*Everything must hold together. In my craving for a logic of being, I cannot help but loathe the threats of interruptions, disseminations, and suspensions. To begin, to develop to a climax, then, to end. To fill, to join, to unify. The order and the links create an illusion of continuity, which I highly prize for fear of nonsense and emptiness.*⁶

Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other*, 1989

3. COMEDY OPERATES OUTSIDE LINEAR TIME

In her 1991 essay *from Elements of Style*, Suzan-Lori Parks delineates the scaffolding that frames and supports her dramatic writing. Elucidating her motives and methods as a playwright, Parks extrapolates on repetition:

we accept it in poetry and call it "incremental refrain." For the most part, incremental refrain creates a weight and a rhythm. In dramatic writing it does the same--yes; but again, what about all those words over and over? [...] First, its not just repetition but repetition with *revision*. And in drama change, revision, is the thing.⁷

After defining repetition, Parks explains the implications of its utility: "secondly, a text based on the concept of repetition and revision is one which breaks from the text which

⁵ Lloyd 250. I argue that Comedy denaturalizes and uncoils these fundamental structures: Comedy has the capacity to suffocate and undermine these fundamental structures to the point of collapse.

⁶ And as Barthes notes, "(The horror of spoiling is even stronger than the anxiety of losing)" (28).

⁷ Parks 9.

we are told to write—the text which cleanly ARCS”.⁸

Further parsing the transgression extended by repetition, Parks writes:

In such plays we are not moving from A --> B but rather, for example, from A --> A --> A --> B --> A. Through such movement we refigure A. And if we continue to call this movement FORWARD PROGRESSION, which I think it is, then we refigure the idea of forward progression. And if we insist on calling writings structured with this in mind PLAYS, which I think they are, then we've got a different kind of dramatic literature.⁹

Expounding the possibility that repetition proffers, Parks enunciates the contours of her aspirations as a playwright: to forge "a different kind of dramatic literature," one that re-imagines the "movement [...] of forward progression." Later in the same essay, she muses:

I walk around with my head full of lay-person ideas about the universe. Here's one of them: "Time has a circular shape." Could Time be tricky like the world once was--looking flat from our place on it--and through looking at things beyond the world we found it round? Somehow I think Time could be like this too. Not that I'm planning to write a science book--the goofy idea just helps me NOT to take established shapes for granted. Keeps me awing it. Attaches the idea of Rep & Rev to a larger shape. Also: [...] Standard Time Line and Standard Plot Line are in cahoots!¹⁰

Thus, it becomes clear that for Parks, "forward progression" refers to time as much as it does to action and event. The thrust of Parks' dramatic structure necessarily emerges from the inextricable simultaneity of form and content. Crafted through and by way of this entanglement, Parks' dramatic writing subverts theatrical conventions, not by rejecting but by re-re-purposing them, wringing into relief a dual utility for the medium's constraints. Rendering and leveraging this double-edged sword, Parks carves out possibility for simultaneity: lacking and full, comic and melancholic, torn and whole, original and derivative, exploited and exploitative.

Employing the device of Rep & Rev, Parks re-devises Forward Progression. In another essay entitled *Possession*, Parks articulates the stakes of forging such a temporality. She writes:

Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to "make" history—that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as a playwright is to—through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life¹¹—locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down.

⁸ Parks 9.

⁹ Parks 9–10.

¹⁰ Parks 10–11.

¹¹ In our present moment, the "special strange relationship between theatre and real-life" has expanded: it has become stranger, more special, and – due to the proliferation of layers and levels of reality – it is more palpably relating all the time.

The bones tell us what was, is, will be; and because their song is a play—something that through a production *actually happens*—I'm working theatre like an incubator to create "new" historical events. I'm re-membling and staging historical events which, through their happening on stage, are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history.¹² [...] Through each line of text I'm rewriting the Time Line—creating history where it is and always was but has not yet been divined.¹³

Throughout her body of work, Parks' dramatic structure and movement are defined by a temporality that emerges from Rep & Rev.¹⁴ Parks' writing for the stage animates a dual function: it is as much an excavation—an act of "putting the body back together"—as it is a re-imagining of the past.¹⁵ Drawing from history, Parks sketches new content as well as form, etching possibility for a Black wholeness within our fraught and exploited landscape.

Despite the ample distinction between the disciplines from which their respective writings emerge, the convergence of Parks' and Lloyd's theorizations is uncanny and undeniable. Reading them alongside one another bridges art and life, bringing the permeable membrane that they share, their double-sided mirror, to the fore. Standard Time Line, Standard Plot Line, and Developmental Narrative of Representation are all three in cahoots!¹⁶

Parks articulates "one of [her] tasks as a playwright," to "locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down". Her articulation echoes with Lloyd's depiction of possibility when he writes:

The insistence of contradiction in racial formations, their inability to totalize the domain of the Subject, is politically as well as historically instructive. [...] For if the public sphere or culture

¹² Here we see a mind/body collapse: the imagined, through a play, actually happens. Thus, that which takes place onstage and that which takes place offstage trade in the same normative, hegemonic logics, and we can potentially disrupt those logics from either location, perspective, or level of reality. Innovations onstage have profound implications offstage; disruptions offstage will inevitably shape that which crosses or inhabits the stage.

¹³ Parks 4–5.

¹⁴ Barthes offers his own take on a notion of Rep & Rev: "I can "surmount," without liquidating; what I have affirmed a first time, I can once again affirm, without repeating it, for then what I affirm is the affirmation, not its contingency: I affirm the first encounter in its difference, I desire its return, not its repetition. I say to the other (old or new): *Let us begin again*" (24).

¹⁵ Parks 5.

¹⁶ To some degree, we can see that time is form and space is content. Thus any collapse or explicit webbing of form and content at least interrupts and at best corrodes this (racist) way of thinking and knowing. To some degree (perhaps to the same degree), Lloyd is calling for an analysis of racism that can attend and attest to the intricacy with which its form and its content, its conception and its dissemination, cross-hatch. As Lloyd parses, the logic with which and onto which racism is constructed is one that insists each moment of its enunciation makes it real, and insists each moment that its reality yields its enunciation. Racism relies upon and disseminates a logic of representation. Thus to disturb that logic is to critically disrupt the system of racism. Ruptures in representation are vital: critical sources of life. Work that collapses form and content, work that brings into relief their cross-hatching ontology, work that foregrounds multiple levels of reality, work that aligns fullness with lack : these fissures breach the hegemony of representation, shoring up its insecurity, laying bare the false foundation from which it emerges.

furnishes a crucial ideological, and racist, regulative site, its critique is guided by what Walter Benjamin designated as the task of the materialist historian – “to brush history against the grain.” [...] To do so is, in effect, to decipher the history of the possible and to trace the contours of numerous alternatives to dominant modes of social formation.¹⁷

Just as Parks’ “bones tell us what was, is, will be,” just as she is “working theatre like an incubator to create ‘new’ historical events,” she is “brush[ing] history against the grain,” “decipher[ing] the history of the possible and [tracing] the contours of” divined possibilities “which, through their happening on stage, are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history”.¹⁸

Linear time is ontologically racist.

Racism is a temporal construct.

The comic tempo exists in non-linear temporality – exists in a live, life-giving, vital, vitalizing, ricocheting, three-dimensional, sentient, embodied Time: a time that traces and holds all the people and all the people’s bones, contouring reality in real time. (Not a time designed to order and exterminate a reality and its people).

Comedy does not just have a rhythm: comedy *is* a rhythm. Comedy is a metronome. If we listen closely, we realize the time comedy keeps and the time comedy tolls is not linear.

4. COMEDY COLLAPSES FALSE DICHOTOMIES

Lloyd stresses that colonization and the field of aesthetics run on the same tracks and are powered by the same fuel: the logic of representation. The false temporality incurred and inferred by a developmental organization of the senses is imposed on reality in order to enact and justify the violent praxis of colonization, just as it is leveraged to cast aesthetic order onto our otherwise (necessarily) chaotic semiotic and somatic scape. Both systems of judgment and classification habitually go around erecting poles and doctoring spectra between them, spectra which trace a developmental narrative of representation.

Representation itself is a hall of trick mirrors, relying on a false logic of metaphor and metonymy (a false logic of synonym on the whole). Aesthetics and colonization, as systems that rely on that hall of trick mirrors, inventory and categorize and subsequently determine and exact the fates of these categorizations, using as a point of departure the fiction (asserted and leveraged as fact) that these categorizations are organic.

The conception of taste to which Lloyd refers tacitly presumes and marches along this narrative of progress, one that articulates the distinction between, say, a wine connoisseur and someone who enjoys a white zinfandel from the corner store, as a *temporal* gap – as a distance that has been walked within one’s own lifetime or over the course of generations such that one’s lineage connotes one’s inheritance and falsely (or is falsely

¹⁷ Lloyd 267.

¹⁸ Parks 4-5 + Lloyd 267.

understood to) stands in for one's taste. In reality, of course, the two judgments and the two scopes of knowledge are entirely concomitant, co-existing in the same moment, and the movement from one pole to the other (the polarity of which is as false as are the terms of the dichotomy¹⁹) may or may not take place – and whether or not it does will not be necessarily (nor solely) determined by the passing of time nor an accumulation of knowledge.

We know that this is a false progression because we know plenty of people who used to love a zinfandel from the deli and then found themselves surrounded by more cash, choices and knowledge with respect to wine, and yet remain partial to the deli's zinfandel. We know that if we polled everyone in the world regarding the best cup of coffee, there would be a bouquet of answers, each no less or more a correct answer to the subjective prompt, and yet coffee shop upon coffee shop pile up on recently repurposed blocks of Brooklyn, all of them leaning on and proliferating the idea that one can achieve through time, study and social mobility, a better palette for and heightened awareness of The Best Cup of Coffee.

Wine and coffee can be helpful in grasping the (faulty) developmental narrative of representation, but nothing illustrates it with more precision than does comedy. Jokes told of and by the body are no less or more funny than those told through a series of abstractions. In comedy, the literary and the literal are absolutely leveled and constantly commingling. A joke is only ever as funny as its audience says that it is, which is to say a joke is never a static entity, but instead an ephemeron, floating between a teller and a told.²⁰

Elucidating the temporal composure of racism, Lloyd extends his profound insight: false binaries and faulty dualisms do not just sit still, but in fact exist in and are predicated on a *temporal* relationship, along a logic of linear progression which is (always already) a narrative of representation.²¹

Parsing what he means by the modern discourse on culture, Lloyd contends that it is “the establishment of a peculiar and historically specific social form, the public sphere²² as

¹⁹ Which is to say: the form of which is as false as is the content.

²⁰ Quite like Zeami's flower. In *A Lover's Discourse*, Roland Barthes offers further insight on the life of that space between: “I divine that the true sit of originality and strength is neither the other nor myself, but our relation itself [...] when the relation is original, then the stereotype is shaken, transcended, evacuated, and jealousy, for instance, has no more room in this relation without a site, without *topos* – without what in French we call, colloquially, ‘*topo*’ – without discourse” (35–6). Barthes elucidates not only the life of the space between, but its critical potential to proliferate life: the capacious implications of innovating or somehow interrupting the habits of that space between.

²¹ This insight is critical, particularly right now, when linear time has dissolved such as it has, thus enabling the undoing of these dualities in a deep and lasting way. Our right now is defined by a particular and profound capacity for disruption and innovation. What sorts of interruptions and incisions we make is up to us; but the energy for capacious change is thick and sure and in the air.

²² In recent years, as a result of the multi-platform social scape that the internet produces and or stages, this conception of a “public sphere,” has been pushed to its capacity, further materialized, manifested its own bursting at its own seams, sort of hyper-realized. Thus if the public sphere has shifted as it has, expanded and multiplied as it has, this indeed signals a critical fissure in the foundation of racism. Its possibility is fundamentally undermined. The public sphere has at once become more material and yet also more abstract, abstracted beyond the abstracted, imagined beyond the imaginary, into

defined in aesthetic theory, as the end of humanity that defines the logical structure of racist discourses".²³ Laying bare the "logical structure of racist discourse", Lloyd foregrounds the shoddy, tautological foundation underpinning this system of oppression: "racism is structured in the first place by the cultural determination of a public sphere and of the subject formation that is its condition of existence".²⁴

In sketching his "phenomenology of racism as it is embedded in the 'disposition of the subject' produced and maintained by Western culture," Lloyd begins "with a moment from one of the founding texts of cultural theory, namely, Immanuel Kant's third critique, *The Critique of Judgement*".²⁵ Lloyd first cites the broader work of the text, "Kant's deduction of the universality of the aesthetic judgment," which "relies on the disinterest of the subject of judgment" – or on what Lloyd refers to as "the 'Subject without properties'" – before closely reading "Taste as a kind of *sensus communis*", an essay of Kant's extending a detailed account of the sordid, romantic encounter between and among identity, beauty, communicability, race, and what it is to be human, in a room lit by heady morality and fragranced by sensuous charm.²⁶

In his rigorous approach to Kant's submission regarding "the idea of a *public* sense," or "a critical faculty which in its reflective act takes account of[...] the collective reason of mankind," Lloyd reveals the double-edged implications of a public sense, shoring up the interdependence and reciprocal causality of the principles that found it as well as those that allegedly emerge from it [emphasis my own]:

In this prescription for the aesthetic judgment, the movement from matter to form in the representation of the object corresponds to a less immediately evident formalization internal to the subject, a formalization that becomes the condition for the existence of a public sense. **Only a subject formalized, if momentarily, into identity with "every one else," that is, with the Subject in general, can provide the conditions for the universal accord of a common or public sense.** As we shall see, **what is at first the merely logical** temporality of the aesthetic judgment **becomes prescriptive** for the narrative of representation through which this actualization of common sense in the modern sphere is to be realized. That process can be summarized in the following propositions:

1. the ordering of "our general state of representative activity" is such as to imply a narrative organization of the senses that moves from sensation to form;
2. this narrative of the senses within the individual human subject finds a correspondent form in the development of the human race;
3. this narrative can be expressed as or, alternatively, depends on a

a real place that is not tangible – it is digible. The space that this new formation of the public sphere takes and makes, its shifty relationship to objective, material, reality, mimics the nonsensical ricochet that Kant reveres as gratifying. The cybersphere serves to collapse the narrative of representation that posits an object to which we viscerally respond and its abstraction, which we ponder with disembodied dignity.

²³ Lloyd 254.

²⁴ Lloyd 254. The terms of subject formation have shifted. The conditions for and of subject formation; the means and the ends of subject formation are in a state of profound disruption : and disruption signals possibility.

²⁵ Lloyd 251.

²⁶ Lloyd 251.

movement from contiguity to identity, or from metonymy²⁷ to metaphor.²⁸

One's ability to identify with the group determines one's claim to Subjectivity. One's ability to access the common sense connotes how much of a subject one is, or how much power one holds as a subject. Impossibly, yet according to this logic, the more power one has, the more one determines that common sense.

Significantly, "what is at first the merely logical [...] becomes prescriptive," which is also a compelling way to enunciate why an identity-based approach, though it may have varying degrees of merit, is always ultimately a dead-end. Ontologically, identity is stable and fixed and always already recalls a stable, fixed point of origin (a moment in the past) which is a fiction, although leveraged as a fact.²⁹ As a critical gear in the function of the logic of representation, it cites another fault line – via its temporality as well as its claim to stability – in the developmental narrative.

In response to Kant's "simultaneously literal and metaphoric usages of both the terms 'common sense' and 'taste,'" Lloyd offers his poetically incisive treatment of the *movement* that Kant ascribes in his quest for the "beautiful, which is to be universally communicable," and his dialectical affair with identity, that "of the individual and [that] of the human 'race'":

what these concepts describe is the very movement they require from the immediate particularity of sensation to the formal generality of the social. For "sense" to become "common," its conditions must be formalized as a disposition of the Subject in each of us; for "taste" to emerge as a social phenomenon, the cultivation of the sense must proceed from the pleasure derived from the existence of the object that is characteristic of literal "taste" to the contemplative relation to the object, which is the capacity of sight. This narrative of the organization of the senses toward an increasing distance from the object and an increasing formalization of its representation is parallel for Kant to the movement from the merely agreeable, which is private and entirely singular, to the beautiful, which is to be universally communicable. In the discourse of aesthetic culture, which itself emerges in the increasing abstraction of *aesthetics* itself from the science of pain and pleasure to that of fine art, this narrative organization of the senses in a crucially *developmental* hierarchy is fundamental.³⁰

Lloyd persistently reiterates that taste and the logic of representation are ensnared in a tautological, mutually co-generative and co-dependent relationship with one another. "The

²⁷ Just as a form/content collapse significantly disrupts hegemonic narratives of representation, collapses and confusions between parts and wholes also disrupt this (racist) logic, carving space for new or different modes of sense-making, creating space for possibility, if not manifesting new possibilities as well.

²⁸ Lloyd 251-2.

²⁹ As Minh-ha affirms: "The *real*, nothing else than a *code of representation*, does not (cannot) coincide with the lived or the performed" (94).

³⁰ Lloyd 252-3. The fact that it is a MOVEMENT, the fact that it is TEMPORAL, in its conception and in its reproduction, make the logic of representation and the social matrix of racism well-suited for dialogue with performativity and theorizations of theatricality. In fact, they are ontologically dialectical, in relationship to one another by design.

discourse of aesthetic culture,” as Lloyd refers to it, in order to distinguish it from its ontological base, is a system which seeks to make sense. It does so by crafting a narrative, that “of the organization of the senses toward an increasing distance from the object and an increasing formalization of its representation”.³¹ Utilizing repetition to underscore his point, Lloyd emphasizes that this narrative organizes the senses “in a crucially *developmental* hierarchy,” a turn of phrase which he has proven to be redundant in its expression of the temporality as well as the power inherent to the narrative.

“The discourse of aesthetic culture,” Lloyd reminds us, “itself emerges in the increasing abstraction of *aesthetics* itself from the science of pain and pleasure to that of fine art”.³² What is meant by the term Aesthetics, the field (or perhaps more aptly, the discipline) of aesthetics, is itself a representation, a formalization of our sensory field of aesthetic stimuli, which Lloyd succinctly calls ‘the science of pain and pleasure.’ Thus, a narrative of representation employs a narrative of representation in imposing a false developmental hierarchy onto reality.

Explication of the relationship between aesthetics and the logic of representation sounds almost nonsensical because it is just that: nonsense. Yet it is nonsense parading around as logic, explicitly claiming the supremacy of logic while issuing the supremacy of logic from its pores. The tyranny of logic³³ is never more apparent than when it breaks down in such a coiled, silly way. The image of a knotted-up slinky comes to mind. The discourse of aesthetic culture and the logic of representation are ontologically entangled, as inextricably co-reliant as a house of cards: any static, well-defined, or steady(ing) distinction drawn between them would be a false one.

The Logic Has No Clothes, and Lloyd persistently parses, taking precise stock of its lack. Laying bare the tenacious recurrence of tautology,³⁴ Lloyd throws into relief still more manifestations of Kant’s proclivity for nonsense: his slippage between the individual and the entire human race, a slip that Kant glosses in order to maintain his paper’s posture as a totalizing theory.³⁵ (A bookstore’s shelves are all labelled, signs announcing the genres of the titles you’ll find just below. Those labels don’t signal all the types of books that there are; they simply tell us what is for sale here today.)

the developmental narrative of sensual organization is required by

³¹ Lloyd 252.

³² Lloyd 252.

³³ A syntax I borrow from Morgan Jenness, who decries the tyranny of realism in the theatre.

³⁴ Barthes revels in the potential energy of the breakdown of logic: “Adorable is the futile vestige of a fatigue – the fatigue of language itself. From word to word, I struggle to put “into other words” the ipseity of my Image, to express improperly the propriety of my desire: a journey at whose end my final philosophy can only be to recognize – and to practice – tautology. [...] What thereby closes off the lover’s language is the very thing which has instituted it: fascination. For to describe fascination can never, *in the last analysis*, exceed this utterance: “I am fascinated.” Having attained the end of language, where it can merely repeat *its last word* like a scratched record, I intoxicate myself upon its affirmation: is not tautology that preposterous state in which are to be found, all values being confounded, the glorious end of the logical operation, the obscenity of stupidity, and the explosion of the Nietzschean yes?” (20–1).

³⁵ “The story never stops beginning or ending. It appears headless and bottomless for it is built on differences. Its (in)finity subverts every notion of completeness and its frame remains a non-totalizable one. The differences it brings about are differences not only in structure, in the play of structures and of surfaces, but also in timbre and in silence” (Minh-Ha 2).

the developmental history of the race of which, at every stage of that development, it is the index. [...] the movement, as Kant puts it, from “the charm of sense to habitual moral interest” that taste makes possible is at once an affair of the individual and of the human “race.” The same development that produces in each individual a capacity for subjectively universal judgments of taste produces in human societies the civilized form of the public sphere. Kant thus describes the movement from a primitive interest in “charms of sense” to “universal communicability”.³⁶

In crafting his conception of taste, Kant’s focus is defining the movement “from the immediate particularity of sensation to the formal generality of the social”. In depicting a single movement, Kant aligns several choreographies, proclaiming them parallel: from literal taste to literal sight; from immediate pleasure in an object’s existence to contemplative pleasure about an object; from the “merely agreeable” to the “beautiful”; from the “private and entirely singular” to the “universally communicable”.

The narrative organization of the senses is a movement, and as such, it invokes time in a two-fold capacity: movement is a physicalization of time, the tangible register of temporality; time is abstracted by a developmental narrative. Thus the narrative organization of the senses, as a movement, is a body-mind invocation and enunciation of (its) temporality. Significantly, we persistently find ourselves requiring the collapse of mind and body in order to rigorously engage with comedy. What’s more, the collapse of mind and body is certainly requisite in engaging comedy – in telling jokes, in making people laugh, and in laughing. A great joke embodies the Kantian Agreeable just as it does the Kantian Beautiful: the experience of a great joke invokes a sensation at once private, entirely singular, and yet universally communicable. As I laugh, I am rooted down into my body, viscerally reminded of my material self; as I laugh, I am reminded of the various groupings to which I belong, catalyzed into awareness of my self among others and the self-ness I share with others. The impossible simultaneity rings true.

Comedy lives in an interstitial space between and among the ends of Kant’s movement – it inhabits the both/and of the polarities of these (false) spectra. Comedy takes place and time outside the logic of representation; it de-naturalizes representation and suffocates³⁷ its testimonies of truth. It becomes proof of the shoddy construction of racism, colonialism, white supremacy, and all the systems built onto or in order to justify them. Comedy is the single thread pulling that unravels the false³⁸ whole.

*Laughter is very powerful -- it's not a way of escaping but a way of arriving on the scene.
Think about laughter and what happens to your body -- it's almost the same thing that happens to you
when you throw up.*

Suzan-Lori Parks, from Elements of Style, 1994

³⁶ Lloyd 252-3.

³⁷ An image I borrow from Minh-Ha, who also writes: “I memorize, recognize, and name my source(s), not to validate my voice through the voice of an authority (for we, women, have little authority in the History of Literature, and wise women never draw their powers from authority), but to evoke her and sing” (122).

³⁸ As Minh-ha reminds us, “Each story is at once a fragment and a whole; a whole within a whole” (123).

Within *The Critique of Judgement*, Kant also delineates his conception of gratification. He begins by classifying “all gratification [...] at bottom bodily sensation”.³⁹ Clarifying the term, Kant submits, “that which gratifies (pleases in sensation) [...] appears always to consist in a feeling of the furtherance of the whole life of the man, and consequently, also of his bodily well-being, i.e. his health”.⁴⁰ Articulating comedy as a source for gratification, Kant traces its path through the body’s organs:

In the case of jokes [...] The play begins with the thoughts, which together occupy the body, [...] and as the understanding stops suddenly short at the presentment, in which it does not find what it expected, we feel the effect of this slackening in the body by the oscillation of the organs, which promotes the restoration of equilibrium and has a favorable influence upon health.⁴¹

Kant’s conception of gratification is fundamentally biological: gratification is felt in the body as a series of physiological symptoms; regardless of its source, its course culminates in a thoroughly embodied experience, free of mind, logic or sense, and constituted entirely by sensation. While the mind may catalyze the gratifying process, or aesthetic judgment may spur the ensuing reaction, Kant defines anything in a moment of gratification that is beyond embodiment as a steward for the body – an usher through the process, but never the subject of its execution:

It is not the judging the harmony in tones or sallies of wit—which serves only in combination with their beauty as a necessary vehicle—but the furtherance of the vital bodily processes, the affection that moves the intestines and the diaphragm, in a word, the feeling of health [...] that makes up the gratification felt by us, so that we can thus reach the body through the soul and use the latter as the physician of the former.⁴²

The mind or the spirit may nourish and heighten the process, but their participation requires their ultimate absence. While this is true for all forms of gratification, Kant’s diagnosis of a successful comic effect (a subset of gratification) casts it as particularly critical.

Depicting ideal conditions for provoking that comic vitality, Kant animates the sensation of gratification, plotting its ricochet through physical and conceptual location:

the jest must contain something that is capable of deceiving for a moment. Hence, when the illusion is dissipated, the mind turns back to try it once again, and thus through a rapidly alternating tension and relaxation it is jerked back and put into a state of oscillation.⁴³

Further parsing gratification’s physiological constitution, Kant reiterates the requisite

³⁹ Kant 45.

⁴⁰ Kant 45.

⁴¹ Kant 47.

⁴² Kant 46–7.

⁴³ Kant 47–8.

evacuation of the mind:

This sudden transposition of the mind, now to one now to another standpoint in order to contemplate its object, may correspond an alternating tension and relaxation [...] and thus bring about a movement beneficial to health; which alone, and not what precedes it in the mind, is the proper cause of the gratification in a thought that at bottom represents nothing.⁴⁴

Kant's definition of laughter is scientific in its certainty – “Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing”⁴⁵ – and remains unwavering throughout his reasoning. Accounting for the “hearty pleasure” that laughter occasions, Kant reiterates the physical indication for such a sensory experience: “expectation was strained (for a time) and then was suddenly dissipated into nothing”.⁴⁶ Disentangling with precision, Kant risks redundancy⁴⁷ in ensuring his clarity:

We laugh loud, and the reason is that an expectation is suddenly transformed into nothing. We must note well that it does not transform itself into the positive opposite of an expected object—for then there would still be something, which might even be a cause of grief—but it must be transformed into nothing.⁴⁸

The nothingness that Kant ascribes is central to his theorization: the more easily and rapidly the catalyst can bounce around the body's organs, massaging their vitality, the more it can generate the sensation of gratification. Less gravity, less meaning, less sense – more sensation.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Kant 48–9.

⁴⁵ Kant 47.

⁴⁶ Kant 47–8.

⁴⁷ It quickly becomes clear that the repetitive structure of Kant's argument reflects its aim, a surprising collapse of form and content amidst a document so deeply invested in disseminating dualisms both wedded and fundamentally differentiated (ranked) by a developmental narrative that sits between their poles, as uncrossable as it is constructed. This slippage is accounted for by Lloyd, who reminds us that “the fissures and contradictions that trouble this narrative are replicated equally at every level or in every site that it informs” (251). Perhaps this is a sighting of Kant's closeted rebellion against representation; perhaps this is another site wherein the fault lines of the logic of representation bare themselves.

⁴⁸ Kant 48.

⁴⁹ The ricochet that Kant illustrates is a form that maps not only laughter but across all shapes of gratification. In his essay, Kant treats laughter and naïveté with equal esteem, defining the latter as “the breaking out of the sincerity originally natural to humanity in opposition to that art of dissimulation which has become second nature” (49). The sensory gratification of apprehending such sincerity runs parallel to that of the comic moment, hinging on expectations set, unmet --

We look for the commonplace manner of artificial utterance devised with foresight to make a fair show; and behold! it is the unspoiled innocent nature which we do not expect to find, and which he who displays it did not think of disclosing (49).

-- and in turn, dissolved to nothing: “The fair but false show which generally has so much influence upon our judgment, is here suddenly transformed into nothing,” and “produces a movement of the mind in two opposite directions, which gives a wholesome shock to the body” (49).

Kant's gratification seems to carve an exit strategy out of the architecture he constructs throughout the rest of his musings on taste and aesthetic judgement – an architecture rigidly defined by a narrative of representation. Kant's thoughts on taste rely on a Mind and a Body – their mutual exclusivity as well as their hierarchy – forging a narrative of progress moving from sense to intellect, from material to abstract, from particular to universal, from low culture to high. Kant's gratification, however, insists on the interaction and (pleasurable) co-mingling of mind and body: a catalyst ricochets between the two – the more rapidly, the more gratifying; and the resulting confusion of which (in addition to the ultimate transformation of the catalyst into nothing) yields the sensory experience of gratification. Not only does gratification depend upon the interplay of the mind and the body, but the resulting disorientation and perhaps momentary inability to distinguish them is its primary source.

Kant's theorem hinges on “the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing;” that is, a transformation *from something into nothing*, the silhouette of which is quite similar to a transformation *from material to abstract*.⁵⁰ And yet, in the case of gratification, that *something* is of the mind: it is an expectation, and therefore an abstraction. Further, that *nothing* is embodied: it is felt, sensory, and according to Kant, it registers in the organs. While this construction surely insists on a mind/body duality, their fertile relation to one another is much more palpable in Kant's conception of gratification than it is in his writings on taste and judgment. Not only is their inter-relation pivotal to his proposal, Kant's gratification re-maps a hegemonic (and his own) narrative of representation, moving from mind to body, not along a linear path of progression, but instead by way of a reverberating route defined by its chaotic unpredictability. Certainly not an upheaval, nor even necessarily a departure, Kant's conception of gratification, embedded in a text which otherwise maintains its allegiance to the narrative structure of representation, does offer a notable revision⁵¹ of the form.

History is time that won't quit.

Suzan-Lori Parks, from Elements of Style, 1994

It is clear that Kant regards such a gratification as more difficult to come by than laughter, but, as such, exquisite to sense upon contact. Because its composition necessitates a lack of awareness and intention on the part of the naïf, he cautions his reader to avoid trying to illicit such a gratified response. However, there is space within his system of classification for an artist to treat this gift of nature, which Kant offers directly: “An art that is to be *naïve* is thus a contradiction; but the representation of naïveté in a fictitious personage is quite possible, and is a beautiful though rare art” (50).

⁵⁰ Kant 47.

⁵¹ Inversion may be a more accurate term. Again, there is an impish ambivalence to Kant's inconsistency. Certainly, a simple inversion of the developmental narrative differentiating mind from body while marking (only) it civilized does not change the narrative structure, nor does it necessarily re-assign roles. In fact, an inversion may just signal a re-inscription, yet another iteration -- this one with more teeth, as it firmly, slyly cements the undergirding logic by leaning on it from a different angle, and perhaps with more intention. However, there remains that wafting mischief: might Kant be extending to us a body endowed with power? With a specialization that can only come from being on the right-hand side of the timeline? Surely, the fact that Kant moves from mind to body along a messy trail does not cast a vote for the latter. (Is the mess characterizing that trail a sign of bastardization or of reverence? Does it matter, since neither signals respect?) Just as surely, it is impossible to know.

5. COMEDY INSISTS ON SPECIFICITY

In her 1953 book *Feeling and Form*, in a chapter entitled *The Comic Rhythm*, Susanne Langer submits that "The pure sense of life is the underlying feeling of comedy".⁵² In locating that "pure sense of life," Langer writes that "Mankind has its rhythm of animal existence, too -- the strain of maintaining a vital balance amid the alien and impartial chances of the world, complicated and heightened by passion desires. The pure sense of life springs from that basic rhythm".⁵³

Langer systematically articulates the social landscape out of which her conception of comedy emerges, outlining a vision of human life/time defined by its continuity:

Living things strive to persist [...] to maintain a particular temperature, to repeat a particular function, and to develop along particular lines, achieving a growth that seems to be preformed in their earliest, rudimentary, protoplasmic structure. [...] This pattern, moreover, does not develop sporadically in midst of mechanical systems; when or where it began on the earth we do not know, but [...] there appears to be no 'spontaneous generation.' It takes life to produce further life. Every Organism, therefore, is historically linked with other organisms. [...] Every individual in this progression that dies (i.e. meets with disaster) instead of dividing is an offshoot from the continuous process, an end, but not a break, from the communal biography.⁵⁴

Illuminating the implications of this communal biography, Langer writes:

An individual is not [...] exposed only to others that visibly or tangibly surround him, but is consciously bound to people who are absent, perhaps far away, at the moment. Even the dead may still play into his life. His awareness of events is far greater than the scope of his physical perceptions.⁵⁵

Both life and life onstage comprise a continuous wholeness, invoking that which is seen and unseen, present and past. Similarly, just as life does not imply a series of individual divisions, life onstage is cultivated by a whole, reflecting and inflecting an intricate system of affect and effect. As Langer describes, "This illusion of life, the stage-life, has a rhythm of feeling which is not transmitted to us by separate successive stimulations, but rather by our perceptions of its entire Gestalt--a whole world moving into its own future."⁵⁶

Here, Langer's syntax belies the structural conceits of her Comedy. "A whole world moving into its own future" demarcates and animates the role of subject (or Protagonist), and the terrain which the subject must traverse, in ways particular to the ends and means of Comedy. Elucidating that particularity, Langer asserts that "Real comedy presents the

⁵² Langer 327.

⁵³ Langer 330.

⁵⁴ Langer 328-9.

⁵⁵ Langer 330.

⁵⁶ Langer 348.

very image of 'livingness' [...] it takes the form of a temporary triumph over the surrounding world".⁵⁷

Langer's sense of vital continuity traces that of Parks. Just as Parks draws her task as a playwright to "locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down," just as those "bones tell us what was, is, will be",⁵⁸ Langer's communal biography insists that each organism "is historically linked with other organisms," insists that each "individual [...] is consciously bound to people who are absent, perhaps far away, at the moment".⁵⁹ Langer and Parks echo one another in their articulation of the connective tissue threading through human life, across time, space, and generation.

Langer defines the essence of comedy as the feeling of life, through her explicit reprise that "the human life-feeling is the essence of comedy"⁶⁰; conversely, she defines the feeling of comedy as the essence of life: "The feeling of Comedy is a feeling of heightened vitality, challenged wit and will, engaged in the great game with Chance. The real antagonist is the World".⁶¹ The tautological inflection in Langer's vision of comedy might be explained by its etymological roots in perpetual rebirth, which she summons in defining its contours:

What justifies the term "Comedy" is not that the ancient ritual procession, the Comus, honoring the god of that name, was the source of this great art form--[...]--but that the Comus was a fertility rite, and the god it celebrated a fertility god, a symbol of perpetual rebirth, eternal live.⁶²

Langer's theorization of comic structure hinges on the "eternal live." This continuity defines the journey of the comic protagonist as much as it shapes its orientation around focal points. According to Langer, comic structure mirrors that of its content. Like the vital continuity that it depicts and emerges from, "Comedy is essentially contingent, episodic, and ethnic; it expresses the continuous balance of sheer vitality that belongs to society and is exemplified briefly in each individual; tragedy is a fulfillment, and its form therefore is closed, final".⁶³

Tuning her focus to jokes and laughs as they surface (or not) throughout the course of the comedy, Langer writes, "They are employed in the play, not merely brought in casually. [...] As thought breaks into speech--as the wave breaks into foam--vitality breaks into humour".⁶⁴ Defining humor as a symptomatic manifestation of vitality, Langer articulates its role in comedy as merely supportive: "Humour, then, is not the essence of comedy, but only one of its most useful and natural elements".⁶⁵ Thus, while it may be a part of comedy, humor is not a necessary element in its structural fabric. In fact, as

⁵⁷ Langer 348.

⁵⁸ Parks 4-5.

⁵⁹ Langer 328-330.

⁶⁰ Langer 331.

⁶¹ Langer 348-9.

⁶² Langer 331.

⁶³ Langer 333-4.

⁶⁴ Langer 345.

⁶⁵ Langer 346.

Langer illustrates,

Comedy may be serious; there is heroic drama, romantic drama, political drama, all in the comic pattern, yet entirely serious; the 'history' is usually exalted comedy. It presents an incident in the undying life of a society that meets good and evil fortunes on countless occasions but never concludes its quest. After the story comes more life [...] it is implicit in its episodic structure.⁶⁶

While the act of defining comedy might seem to cast comedy and tragedy in a polarity, Langer demystifies their entanglement, insisting that "The difference between the two types of drama [...] is [...] not one of opposites [...] The matrix of the work is always either tragic or comic; but within its frame the two often interplay".⁶⁷ While comic moments and tragic beats intermingle throughout and over the course of a given drama, its "entire gestalt" communicates to us, and "its rhythm of feeling" lets us hear the sum of its shape, which will be Tragic (finite) or Comic (infinite).⁶⁸

The drama maintains its integrity; the drama has a shape. Shunning all fantasies of purity or mutual exclusivity, Langer reminds us that of course that rhythmic gestalt is composed of many woven beats and threads, each of which can be tragic and comic and either/or and both/and. In accounting for their interplay, Langer carefully parses their potential convergence and necessary divergence: "Where it reaches something like the exalted character of *nataka*, our comedy has generally been taken for tragedy, simply because of its dignity, or "sublimity," [...] yet [...] the Fate their personages meet is really misfortune, and they meet it heroically".⁶⁹ Dignity is not tragedy. Comedy is not not dignity. In fact, Comedy sees the truth and speaks the truth of the triumph of the human spirit over the surrounding world: its "perpetual rebirth," its "eternal live".⁷⁰

Langer's reiterative definition persists: "Comedy is [...] an image of human vitality holding its own in the world amid the surprises of unplanned coincidence".⁷¹ Illuminating the comic scaffolding underpinning the *nataka* and the work of Racine and Corneille, Langer writes:

Characters are godlike in their rationality [...] they undergo [...] no great moral struggle or conflict of passions. Their morality (however extraordinary) is perfect, their principles clear and coherent [...] There is no question of how the heroes will meet circumstances; they will meet them rationally; reason, the highest virtue of the human soul, will be victorious. This reason does not grow; through inner struggles against passion obstacles, from an original to full enlightenment [...] but is perfect from the outset.⁷²

⁶⁶ Langer 334.

⁶⁷ Langer 334.

⁶⁸ Tragedy is within the bounds of normative linear time, while comedy is out of control. Outside linear time. Beyond a time that imagines its own developmental progress. Perpetual rebirth. Ongoing endurance. All time? No time? Who's to say? But not linear time.

⁶⁹ Langer 336.

⁷⁰ Langer 331.

⁷¹ Langer 331.

⁷² Langer 337-8.

Langer articulates the dramatic thrust of comedy, elucidating that which might drive a story emerging from and defined by its continuity:

The incidents are so disposed as to bring out to the full the conflict between an over mastering will and the forces of Fate, but the interest centers in the dauntless endurance of the individual and there is little attempt to envisage or suggest the universal moral problem inherent in the nature of Tragedy, nor do [...] characters submit to ordinary morality; each is a law unto himself by virtue of his particular kind of heroism.⁷³

The comedy bears witness to “the dauntless endurance” of its protagonist, centering on the persistence of a character despite shifting circumstance. While tragedy emerges from a character’s change in relation to his reality, comedy is engendered by a character’s sameness. Thus, “Because the comic rhythm is that of vital continuity, the protagonists do not change in the course of the play”.⁷⁴

*Don't be shy about looking gorgeous.
I suggest black.*

Suzan-Lori Parks, from Elements of Style, 1994

*I am I and my name is Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel, and then oh then I could yes I could I could
begin to cry but why why could I begin to cry.*

*And I am I and I am here and how do I know how wild the wild world is how wild the wild woods
are the wood they call the woods the poor man's overcoat but do they cover me and if they do how wild
they are wild and wild and wild they are, how do I know how wild woods are when I have never ever
seen a wood before.*

*I wish, (she whispered) I knew why woods are wild why animals are wild why I am I, why I can cry,
I wish I wish I knew, I wish oh how I wish I knew. Once I am in I will never be through the woods are
there and I am here and am I here or am I there, oh where oh where is there and animals wild animals
are everywhere.
She sits down.*

*I wish (says she conversationally) I wish if I had a wish that when I sat down it would not be here
but there there where I could have a chair there where I would not have to look around fearfully
everywhere there where a chair and a carpet underneath the chair would make me know that there is
there, but here here everywhere there is nothing nothing like a carpet nothing like a chair, here it is wild
everywhere I hear I hear everywhere that the woods are wild and I am here and here is here and here I
am sitting sitting without a chair without a carpet, oh help me to a carpet with a chair save me from the
woods the wild woods everywhere where everything is wild wild and I I am not there I am here oh dear I
am not there.*

*She stands up with her hands at her sides she opens and closes her eyes and opens them again.
[...]*

In the distance there is daylight and near to there is none.

from Gertrude Stein's Doctor Faustus Lights The Lights, 1938

In 1921, George Barnard Shaw wrote *Tolstoy: Tragedian or Comedian?*, in which he champions the Comedy as the dramatic form uniquely elastic enough to evolve with and

⁷³ Langer 336.

⁷⁴ Langer 335.

reflect its time. Celebrating the “new species, which,” he writes, “has been called tragi-comedy when any attempt has been made to define it,” Shaw embeds in his treatment of Tolstoy’s work his own theorization of comedic structure.⁷⁵ Lauding the “tragi-comedy as a much deeper and grimmer entertainment than tragedy,” Shaw insists that it is the form of the future: “In its tragedy and comedy alike, the modern tragi-comedy begins where the old tragedies and comedies left off”.⁷⁶

In parsing out the evolution of the tragi-comedy, Shaw’s belief in the singular capacity of comedy becomes evident:

Tragedy itself never developed: it was simple, sublime, and overwhelming from the first: it either failed and was not tragedy at all or else it got there so utterly that no need was felt for going any further. [...] in the main Tragedy remained on its summit,⁷⁷ simple, unmixed, and heroic, from Sophocles to Verdi. Not so Comedy. When [...] horseplay and fun for fun’s sake [gave way] to serious chastening of morals less and less by ridicule and more and more by irony, the comic poet becoming less and less a fellow of infinite jest and more and more a satirical rogue and a discloser of essentially tragic ironies, the road was open to a sort of comedy as much more tragic than a catastrophic tragedy as an unhappy marriage, or even a happy one, is more tragic than a railway accident.⁷⁸

After plotting the static nature of Tragedy alongside the pliable nature of Comedy through his Theatre’s history, Shaw asserts, “Thus Comedy has become the higher form”.⁷⁹ It is not only what the comedy is able to express, but the fact that its form can evolve within its contemporary moment in order to steadily hold the perceptions and reflections of the artists of its time, that for Shaw makes Comedy “the higher form.” While tragi-comedy can offer the stage and its spectatorship the insight and critical activation that Shaw sees as necessary in his socio-political moment, it is Comedy that engenders a form so responsive to its terrain.⁸⁰ Shaw championed a spirit of experimentalism in the theatre, and knew that only from a theatre of Comedy could those requisite, thirsted-after innovations emerge.

As Arnold Aronson attests in *Their Exits and Their Entrances: Getting A Handle on Doors*, “The theatre functions as a kind of collective dream⁸¹ for its society [...] It is a door into

⁷⁵ Shaw 431.

⁷⁶ Shaw 431–2.

⁷⁷ Recall Langer on Tragedy as “closed, final” : reading Langer’s against Shaw’s tragedy fortifies and further funds the elasticity of comedy – its ability to move with reality, hold all of its specifics (all of its surface area) and reflect the continuity and interconnectedness (nonlinear temporality) that is reality.

⁷⁸ Shaw 431.

⁷⁹ Shaw 432.

⁸⁰ Spatial and temporal, material and abstracted: scape, in the broadest, most full-bodied sense of the word.

⁸¹ Notably, the term ‘dream’ here extends a multiplicity of meaning, simultaneously invoking a reflection, a vision, a distorted vision, an ambition, an underbelly, a hidden truth, an un-tethered fantasy ... the list proliferates. Significantly, the abundance of meaning offered by the term ‘dream’ resists any simple classification as good or bad, positive or negative.

the soul of humankind”.⁸² Aronson’s conception of theatre’s cultural function, in tandem with Shaw’s insistence on the singularly responsive, singularly elastic capacity of comedy, illuminates the reciprocally reflective nature of comedy onstage. What takes place on the comic stage tells us a great deal about that stage’s surround. Because a mirror is a two-way street, because causal relationships are never 1:1 and always resist static definition, the comic stage reflects and just as surely shapes its cultural context. To borrow David Lloyd’s turn of phrase, comedy is *descriptive and also crucially productive*: comedy functions as both a cultural barometer and a cultural humidifier.

Comedy does not just have a rhythm: comedy *is* a rhythm. Comedy is a metronome. Comedy is the door on *our* stage. If we listen closely, we realize the time comedy keeps and the time comedy tolls is not linear.

Racism wants there to be a whole and wants individuals to stand in for the whole. White supremacy insists on erasing the specificity and the individuality of people and of circumstance.

Grabbing on to one little bite and digesting, reflecting, responding out loud : now that’s a powerful act. And one that dismantles the fantasy of a totalizing theorem, or of an omniscient narrator.

By definition, Comedy is ethnic (Langer); Comedy is responsive (Shaw); Comedy compels us to arrive on the scene (Parks). Comedy takes on the whole, big, totalizing force, the wet blanket logic of representation that seemingly might drown us, bears down on its locality, and gets real / specific. Sees from its point of view; speaks from its point of view. With one swift, sly grin, Comedy tears down the conceit of the Public Sense and insists on the truth of the particular.

Comedy is persistently, resistantly specific in time, place, and perspective. In the face of racist metonymy and its part-for-the-whole logic, comedy elaborates its point of view and insodoing shatters the phantasy that only the Unmarked Subject has eyes to vocalize. Comedy offers vitality by way of specificity, insisting on the fact of the particular and on the dignity of the local.

The wind has shifted, hasn’t it? (He makes the gestures of manipulating the sail.)

Hikaru, in Yukio Mishima’s The Lady Aoi, 1957

6. CONCLUDING : ON THE POLITICAL THRUST OF COMEDY

Comedy fills out the holes while it digs out the “wholes.”

Comedy takes on the whole, offers takes on the whole, pokes holes in the whole, pokes fun at the whole. Pokes holes and lets us breathe. And the whole withers as a result –

⁸² Aronson 332.

because the whole is a fantasy and the holes are the truth.

Comedy is a liberatory praxis, offering vitality in the face of oppression. Comedy interrupts the persistent naturalization of the narrative of progress, defying its totalizing tyranny and denouncing its underlying logic of representation. Deflating its delusions of developmental grandeur, rendering it impotent. Comedy disrupts linear time and dismantles false dichotomies. Comedy renounces the Unmarked Subject and insists on specificity. Comedy reimagines progress; comedy reckons with the co-insiding inextricability of mind and body. Comedy grounds into its peripheral vision, offers tiny insights when it can. Comedy honors the unwavering diligence of the human spirit. Comedy celebrates the mere and sheer work ethic that is survival, and rewards it with that reason for living, that essence of life, that inalienable human right : Pleasure. Comedy is a liberatory praxis.

Now, of course, not all comedy: some want to simply use the form in service of their ego, or to perpetuate the norms that have led the mic or the pen into their hands to begin with. But the liberatory praxis is woven so deeply into the fibrous core of its spiritual flesh that even when one doesn't mean to wield the real power of the comic incision, the effect is the same. That is what we see from Kant: even an architect of the narrative of representation cannot help but disassemble the racist and dissembling logic undergirding his apparatus of analysis when treating comedy.

As we embark on this decidedly shifted terrain, we will need some extent of preparation. As a threshold, this moment requires bravery: to lean into the seedlings, though the grasses are so seemingly well-developed; to lean into disorder and let go of outmoded modes of being and of seeing. This moment requires trust and gut and trust in gut. Jack Halberstam's reading of Moten and Harney might be galvanizing to this end:

The path to the wild beyond is paved with refusal. [...] Moten and Harney also study what it would mean to refuse what they term the 'call to order.' And what would it mean, furthermore, to refuse to call others to order, to refuse interpellation and the reinstantiation of the law. When we refuse, Moten and Harney suggest, we create dissonance and more importantly, we allow dissonance⁸³ to continue [...] when we refuse the call to order [...] we refuse order as the distinction between noise and music, chatter and knowledge, pain and truth.⁸⁴

Just as subjectivity maintains an internal awareness and an external interpellation – an acknowledgement of self and an acknowledgement as self – the bravery we require now is one that harbors a thrust both internal and external. Expanded awareness requires the lung capacity to take it all in; truthful sight takes courage.

And when we are called to this other place, the wild beyond, "beyond the beyond" in Moten and Harney's apt terminology, we have to give ourselves over to a certain kind of craziness. Moten reminds us that even as Fanon took an anti-colonial stance, he knew that it "looks crazy" but, Fanon, as a psychiatrist, also knew *not* to accept this organic division between the rational and the crazy and he knew that it would be crazy for him not to take that stance in a world

⁸³ Comedy as dissonance: and dissonance as what we need and need more of and always and on and on

⁸⁴ Halberstam 8–9.

that had assigned to him the role of the unreal, the primitive and the wild. Fanon, according to Moten, wants not the end of colonialism but the end of the standpoint from which colonialism makes sense. In order to bring colonialism to an end then, one does not speak truth to power, one has to inhabit the crazy, nonsensical, ranting language of the other, the other who has been rendered a nonentity by colonialism.⁸⁵

Jack Halberstam, *The Wild Beyond: With and For the Undercommons*

For a hundred years, (literary) madness has been thought to consist in Rimbaud's "*Je est un autre*": madness is an experience of depersonalization. For me as an amorous subject, it is quite the contrary: it is becoming a *subject*, being unable to keep myself from doing so, which drives me mad. *I am not someone else*: that is what I realize with horror.⁸⁶

Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*

My story, no doubt, is me, but it is also, no doubt, older than me. Younger than me, older than the humanized. Unmeasurable, uncontainable, so immense that it exceeds all attempts at humanizing. But humanizing we do, and also overdo, for the vision of a story that has no end – no end, no middle, no beginning; no start, no stop, no progression; neither backward nor forward, only a stream that flows into another stream, an open sea – is the vision of a madwoman.⁸⁷

Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other*

Comedy is a "nonsensical, ranting language of the other" ; comedy offers us a way to "speak truth to power" by *being* truth in the face of power. Comedy offers us the choreography for an "anti-colonial stance," gives us the steps and the shoes in order that we might look properly crazy. As a wrighter, as a reader, as a watcher, as a performer: comedy extends a place and time (a place in time?) beyond "the standpoint from which colonialism makes sense." The nonsense rings true; the nonentity speaks. The void fills, the nothing proves ever fertile.

While Comedy does not offer us refuge from madness, it does allow us to revel in our madness. Comedy is our trap door. No way out but through. And yet, comedy extends to us a way to go out and through, through the beyond, to the beyond the beyond.

Comedy gives us a place to inhabit and a way to inhabit it. A way to feel steadied by the constant unsteadiness. Its interstitiality, its instability, its irreverence, and its utter disloyalty to everything and everyone: its anoriginary place, its anoriginary time, its anoriginary drive, its anoriginary means, its anoriginary end. An end which is not an end at all, but an ongoing and going, because if its one thing we know, "time [...] won't quit".

In his foreword to *A Lover's Discourse*, Wayne Koestenbaum writes of Barthes' love affair with nuance: "Nuance is distinct from beauty, love, or virtue. Nuance is not a direct object; it is an aura that the object surreptitiously allows." The indirectness of Koestenbaum's nuance is apt when attempting to articulate comedy. Comedy is ontologically without ontology. Comedy is unstable, non-static, never here, always there. Comedy is a mode. A way. Like nuance, it is a perspiration, never a thing in itself.

⁸⁵ Halberstam 8.

⁸⁶ Barthes 121.

⁸⁷ Minh-ha 123.

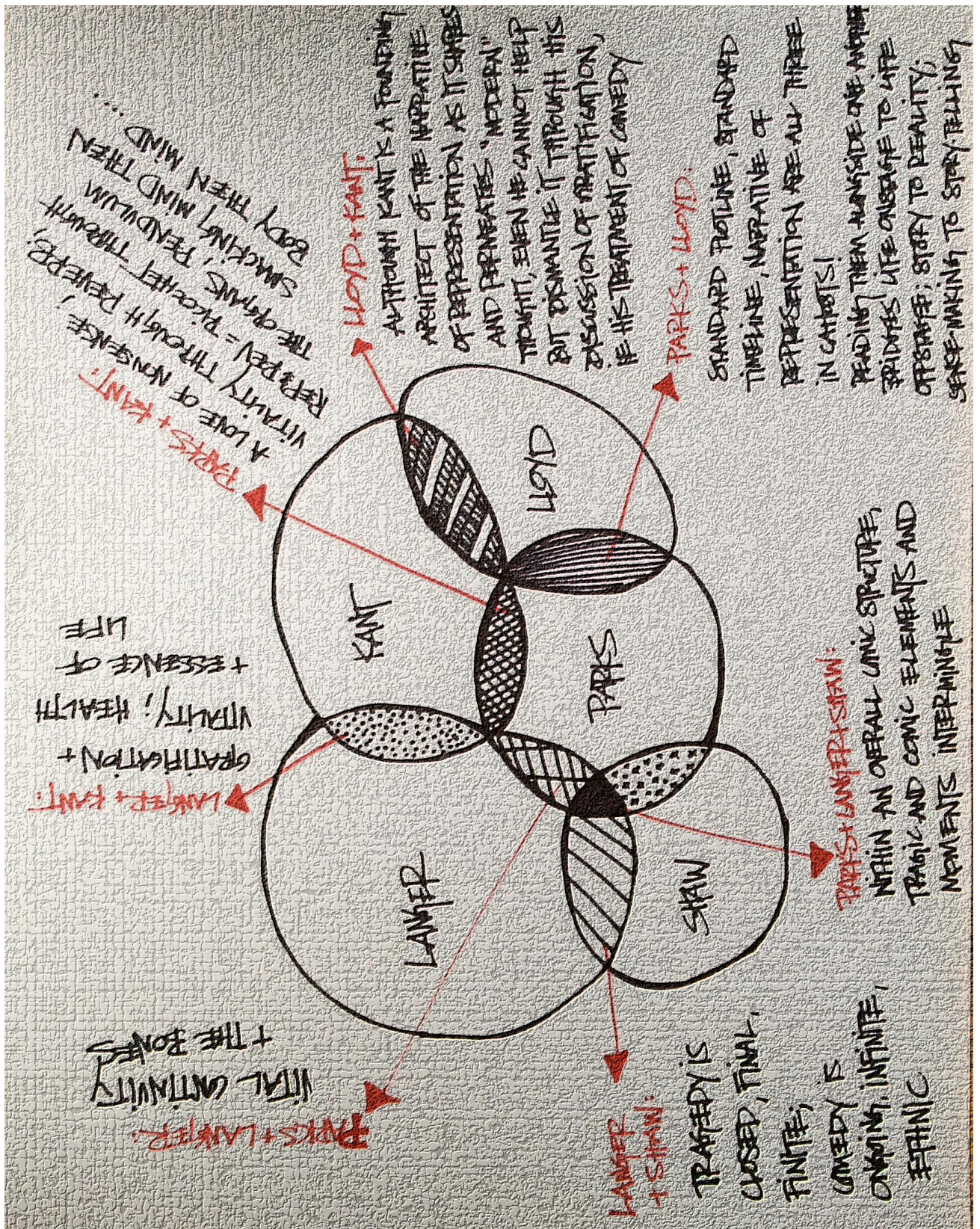
Always issuing from its source with pleasure, giving pleasure, assuring us of the abundance of pleasure there is to be felt. Like pleasure, comedy cannot be had – only felt, as it is ever passing through. It points at structure's contours, it points out structure's fallibility, it ridicules structure's pride.

Minh-ha tells us: "Between the twin chasms of navel-gazing and navel-erasing, the ground is narrow and slippery".⁸⁸ Comedy, lithe and sure-footed, is clever enough to traverse that ground. Not to move from A to B, but simply to move: to move on, to move out, to move from, to move in – to breathe movement where standing water threatens death. Comedy is life.

*In life, we usually don't know when an event is occurring; we think it is starting when it is already ending; and we don't see its in/significance. The present, which saturates the total field of our environment, is often invisible to us. The structural activity that does not carry on the cleavage between form and content but emphasizes the interrelation of the material and the intelligible is an activity in which structure should remain an unending question: one that speaks him/her as s/he speaks it, brings it to intelligibility.*⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Minh-ha 28.

⁸⁹ Minh-ha 143.



That is one account on one account.
from Gertrude Stein's Patriarchal Poetry, 1927

b i b l i o g r a p h y.

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